

LESSONS LEARNED FROM EPA’S CLIMATE LEADERS PROGRAM

AN EVALUATION TO FORTIFY VOLUNTARY ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES

Vivian Futran, Master of Environmental Studies, Spring 2011

Readers: Elaine Wright (UPenn) Leslie Jones (EPA)



www.epa.gov/climateleaders

ABSTRACT

Tools for modeling the ideal design, implementation, and evaluation of a voluntary environmental program (VEP) are not yet comprehensive. This research contributed to such an instrument: a multidisciplinary “guiding framework” for VEPs that captures those primary characteristics correlated with program success. A recently cancelled Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) VEP called Climate Leaders is examined in a three-pronged approach: a meta-analysis of program evaluation theory, a review of guides and external reports on Climate Leaders, and interviews with former participants (partners and implementers) in the program. Results indicate that VEP terminations must be handled with more notice and better explanation than was Climate Leaders, and that environmental protection is best achieved by combining regulatory *and* voluntary methods which complement and buttress each other. EPA and other environmental organizations can best handle future and minimize wasted resources by heeding these recommendations and similar industry-vetted parameters.

INTRODUCTION

The US EPA was founded in 1970 and has seen many federal voluntary environmental programs (VEPs) rise and fall. These are canceled for reasons ranging from poor execution to a change in the administration’s budget or political priorities. Such terminations can mean a loss of the resources hitherto invested by both the government and participants. Also, even overall strong programs that are deficient in one area or that are unexpectedly terminated can hurt the reputation of VEPs, thus weakening an important tool for environmental protection. Such an end could be mitigated or prevented by tools to better design and evaluate voluntary environmental programs, specifically at the federal and regional level. This need would be met by a guiding framework that captures all of the characteristics known to correlate with success of VEPs, and which addresses both the design and implementation phases of a program. This measure would help avoid prematurely terminated programs and wasted resources.

METHODS

•Evaluation Theory Meta-Analysis
Surveyed existing evaluation methods from organizational literature and incorporating resources from EPA Evaluation Support website. Researched scholarly journals and publications.
•Climate Leaders Program Information
Reviewed EPA websites, agency and NGO publications, and articles about Climate Leaders and similar VEPs.
•Interviews
Conducted interviews with former Climate Leaders implementers (EPA employees) and “partners” (participating organizations and businesses). Fourteen formal interviews were conducted total, each of which addressed all of the standardized interview questions: 4 implementers, 10 partners. Additional “informational” interviews that did not adhere to the same standard of consistency were not included in the interview analysis portion of analysis. The questions were based on the literature review, and finalized according to guidance from EPA professionals with experience implementing VEPs.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was your role in Climate Leaders?
2. To your knowledge, how was the performance of this program tracked during its existence?
3. According to what specific criterion would you personally have judged the success or failure of this program (if you were a manager in EPA)?
4. For Climate Leaders, how do you define success?
5. What was your overarching impression of the program: was it a success or a failure according to your experience?
6. What qualities for success do you think this program exemplified, if any?
7. If you had to choose a single attribute, what was the main reason this program was a success/failure?
8. What specific qualities for success do you think this program lacked, if any? (e.g. How could this program have been improved?)
9. Do you think others with your role had the same experience with this program?
10. Do you think others in a different role had the same experience with this program?
11. Anything else to add?

ANALYSIS + DISCUSSION

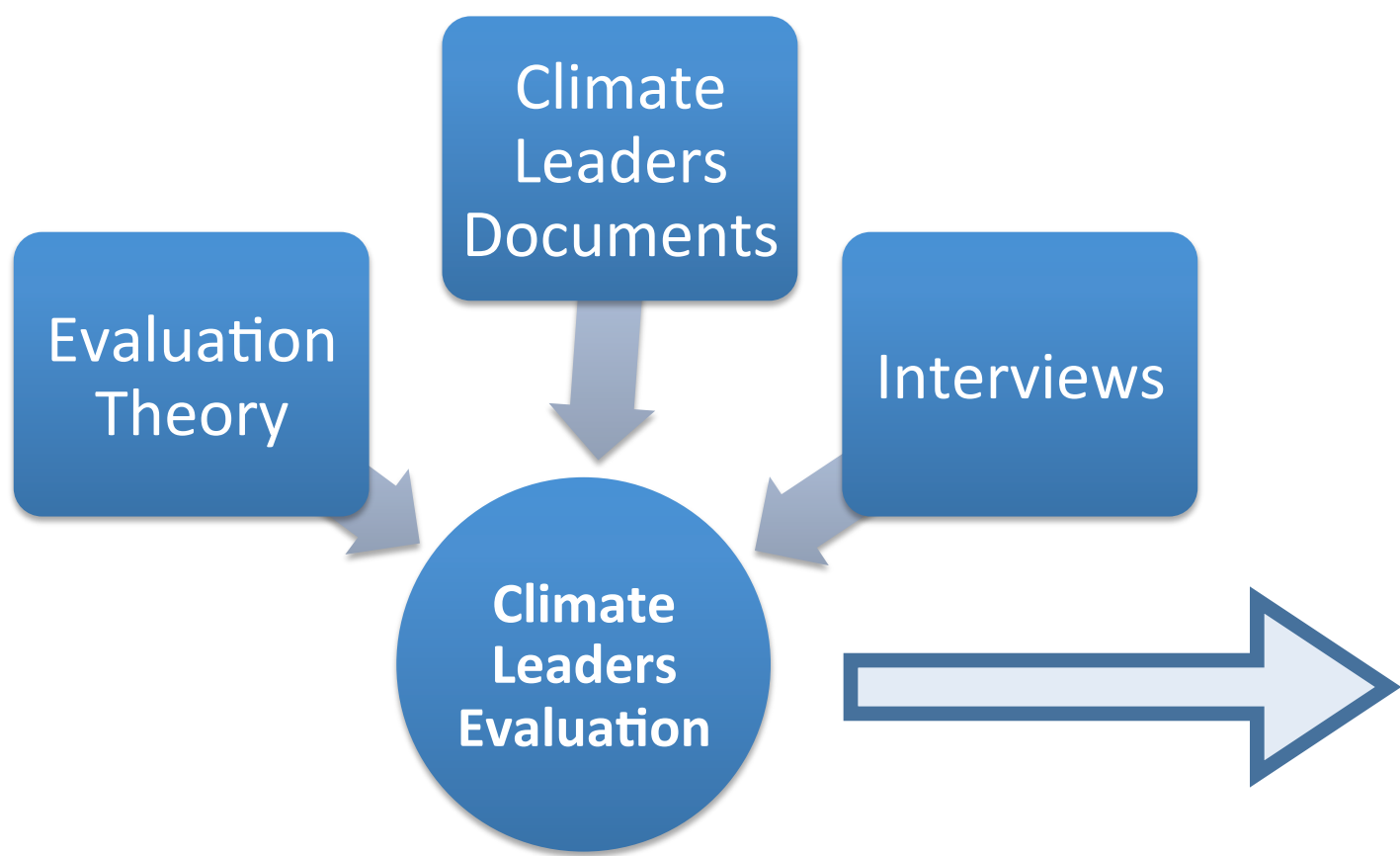
•VEPs in US
EPA traditionally relied on regulation to force responsible environmental stewardship, but it has struggled against budget cuts and limited funding allocated by congress. One way to increase efficiency was through VEPs, which are collaborative arrangements between firms, regulators, or other third parties in which firms voluntarily commit to actions that improve the natural environment. They encourage rather than mandate businesses and other organizations to adopt environmentally protective measures. Incentive and market-based schemes lower administrative costs.
•Climate Leaders
Centralized at EPA headquarters with minimal outreach to Regional offices, and only 4 full-time staff at any given time. Was a remarkably well-oiled and well-regarded initiative until ending in 2010. Partners committed to delivering a GHG inventory, emissions reduction goal, management plan, data, and publicity. EPA provided recognition, technical assistance, and credibility.

CONCLUSION

Strengths	Weaknesses
Assistance for data collection and accounting	Consultants not familiar with industries
Aggressive goals and rigorous requirements	Goals did not evolve with growing program
Great membership traction and numbers	Unable to bring laggards along
High level partner engagement	Terminated before the bar was raised
Clear expectations	Too much flexibility
Prepared partners for regulation	Did not have external auditing
Feeling of cooperation and family within industry	Not enough meetings and conference calls
Committed and knowledgeable staff	Ended before regulation
Technical expertise	Inefficient assistance
Celebrated success publicly	No defined beginning or end
National scale emissions awareness and reduction	Termination right after many partners invested
Carbon management into business world	Understaffed and unsustainable
Knowledge-sharing outside competitive arena	No replacement now for sharing and guidance
Transparent and robust	Deficient analysis of program numbers
Showed what VEP can accomplish	Termination reduced faith in VEPs

WORKS CITED

•Darnall N., Carmin J. (2005). Greener and cleaner? The signaling accuracy of U.S. voluntary environmental programs. *Policy Sciences*, 38(2-3), 71.
•Borck, J. C., & Coglianese, C. (2009). Voluntary environmental programs: Assessing their effectiveness. *Annual Review of Environment & Resources*, 34(1), 305-324.
•Delmas M. A., Terlaak, A. K. (2001). A Framework for Analyzing Environmental Voluntary Agreements. *California Management Review*, 43(3), 44-63.
•Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (2010), EPA to Transition Climate Leaders Program, Press release.
•Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). (2010). Program evaluation glossary. Retrieved 7 Nov 2010, 2010, from <http://www.epa.gov/evaluate/glossary/m-esd.htm>.
•Steelman T.A., Rivera J. (2006). Voluntary environmental programs in the United States: Whose Interests. *Organization & Environment*; Dec 2006, 19(4), 505.
Pizer, W. A., Mogenstern, R., & Shih, J. (2008). Evaluating voluntary climate programs in the united states. Resources for the Future.



RECOMMENDATIONS TO EPA REGARDING VEPs

- Create program lifelines up front, including exit strategy
- Analyze growth potential of program and staff accordingly
- Implement a termination slowly (in phases) and provide alternative resources to take program’s place

- Assistance more in bulk and less one-on-one
- Analyze program numbers to understand full effect of program
- Use consultants with industry experience

